

Secretary of State Debra Bowen
Inaugural Speech
Monday, January 8, 2007

Wow, thank you so much. You know, I've always wanted to swear on a stack of bibles. I finally got to do it. One is a 500 year-old Bible from...somewhere...(audience comment) no, that would be more than 500, and the other is a family Bible belonging to my stepmother Annie Casey Bowen.

I do need to begin to thank a number of people. First and foremost, of course, my husband, Mark Nechodom. It's really impossible to do a statewide campaign without an incredible amount of domestic support. He frequently introduced himself as the Chief of Domestic Affairs. Some people thought that it was actually a title. It may be, but it comes with no staff. I also want to thank my dad, Bob Bowen, my stepmother, Annie Bowen, my stepdaughter, Nora Miller Nechodom, my mother Marcia Ann Crittenden Bowen, who is gone more than 25 years, but nonetheless is with me every single day and guides my steps in much of what I do. My foster daughter Maya Lujan is not here. Today is the first day of the semester in the Graduate Fine Arts training at the University of Southern California, and it is also the first day of school for my two granddaughters Avida and Amiela. So we didn't want to have all three of them playing hooky at the same time. But my sister Seiko Uyeda is here with her husband, Yutaka, and my nephews Kota and Taku. And Kota gets the creativity award for getting both boys out of school with, "Mommmmm, it's a once in a lifetime opportunity!" Good job, Kota!

I'd like to thank Senate Pro Tem Don Perata for being here, and for his kind words this afternoon. The Legislature is very important to me. It is where I learned so much of what has readied me for this opportunity. It's where I learned how to bring people with different ideas together to compromise. It's where I had the experience of being lied to, to my face, by Enron executives. A useful experience I can assure you. And it is where I learned a great deal about everything in life, really.

I intend to stay very close, both to the Legislature and the Courts, as the three branches of government in California. The three equal branches of government move this state and this country forward. And I also want to thank my good friend and today's emcee, former Assemblywoman and Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin. Thank you so much Delaine. And as she mentioned, having her here today with me means you are looking at one third of the total number of women who had ever been elected to serve in a statewide constitutional office in the 157 years of California statehood. We have some work to do.

Thank you to Walter Little, our former Senate Chaplin, for coming out of your retirement. The cats were new, (laughter, in reference to earlier comments) we were isolating them from the cats that were there already and they got to smell each other under the doors, to get used to each other and he was quite surprised and I think concerned that I would lock my two new ones in the bathroom for long hours.

I also would like to thank Will Semmes, who is the Director of the California Conservation Corps, for providing us with the young corps members to present the colors today.

Mark and I have been out in the backcountry program with the CCC's, and it is a program and an approach that I want to support. Young people, and that really does mean young, not just young at heart, serve in a program that guarantees hard work, low pay and miserable conditions. That's the motto of the California Conservation Corps. And they come out of it as citizens with a great deal of pride in themselves and a great deal to offer the rest of us, their state, their country, their family. Please join me in giving the color guard a round of applause.

There are many folks that I want to publicly acknowledge. It's obviously impossible for me to do that, but afterwards I hope to be able to say thank you to everyone who is here. I do want to single out Rusty Areias, my former colleague from the Assembly. In any campaign there are periods that are just low and difficult, and Rusty managed to be there for all of those in this campaign. He has an uncanny ability to be there right when it was needed. Once at the very beginning when we sat down to have lunch and he said to me, "Wow, when I ran for statewide office, it was so fabulous. I met the most incredible people around the state, and I really had fun." And I realized, I wasn't having fun. And that changed the whole campaign, because it actually was fun and I was meeting phenomenal people. But I forgot that it was fun, until Rusty reminded me.

Finally, thank you to Justice Nicholson for coming down from the bench to administer the oath of office. I asked Justice Nicholson in here in particular because he is absolutely responsible for my being here today. It was about 13 years ago when he asked then Chief Justice Malcolm Lucas, Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court, to appoint me to a newly forming group, called the Court Technology Task Force. This group of people was charged with the mission of getting 208 courts, using 208 different computer systems, to bring the California Courts into the 21st Century. And it was through the courts, not through the Legislature, that I had my formal training in information technology for the public sector.

The courts provided me with the opportunity and the financial means to attend a program at Harvard's Kennedy School. By serving on the Court Technology Task Force I was around a lot of very smart and very knowledgeable people, and I began to learn to think strategically about how to use information technology in furtherance of an efficient and open government; one that could serve all the people with the minimum impact on taxpayers' wallets. I took that experience back to the Legislature and then Assemblymember Jim Cuneen, Republican from San Jose, and I worked on a bipartisan basis to create oversight of IT expenditures in the Executive Branch and it opened a whole new road to me.

I would also like to thank my immediate predecessors in this office.

Now, Jerry Brown served from 1971 to 1975, but I think it would be very dangerous for me to start talking about Jerry Brown. So let's just say those were the years he was here.

March Fong Eu is legendary of course, and we have her to thank for this extraordinary building.

It was Secretary of State Bill Jones who put campaign contribution information online for the first time. I remembered being lobbied by Secretary of State Jones for the \$500,000 in seed money that he needed to begin making campaign finance information available to the public. That was in about 1996. Now, that is a very old system. Ten years in IT time and that's one of the priorities is to begin replacing that. But it wasn't a hard sell, and it was very innovative.

Kevin Shelley had the hard work of evaluating new kinds of voting systems at a very, very early stage and guess what, it turns out that he was right on a great many issues that had at their core the security and accuracy of the vote. Secretary Shelley also began new efforts to do outreach to eligible voters who either weren't registered or who had registered but were not voting.

And I want to take some of those efforts five steps further. We obviously need a new way to reach our young voters even before they're old enough to vote. We basically need the same kind of dedication that has brought us the enduring legacy of the California Conservation Corps; to bring the concepts, ideas, and the very notion of responsibility, civic responsibility, to our young people. So that when they are 18, they can't wait to get that ballot and nobody is saying to them, "Well, aren't you going to register?" That's something that Kevin Shelley started, something I will continue.

I also would like to thank outgoing Secretary of State Bruce McPherson, who came into this office at a particularly challenging time and was able to re-establish the focus of the agency. Something that was sorely needed, at the time.

So for me, this is about democracy and self-rule. These are incredible and very powerful ideas. They're ideas that have lasted in this country, have endured for over 200 years. Ideas that we have the responsibility to carry out, to pursue, and to modernize when it's necessary. For anyone who thinks the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence needs always to be interpreted exactly as it was written; I want to remind you that when this country was created, only those who were white, male, and in most states, owned fifty acres were allowed to cast ballots.

Fortunately, we were smart enough to realize that you could not have a government by the people, of the people, and for the people unless you included all of the people in the right to self-governance and self-determination. It wasn't that long ago that women in this state got the vote and that was only after two tries. The first try for women, in the state of California, the initiative passed in 56 of the 58 counties. It lost in San Francisco and Alameda counties. The San Francisco Chronicle opined against giving women the right to vote, something which I remind the Chronicle reporters on a regular basis.

Why was this, you may ask? Well, at the time, the Gold Rush was on and there were important liquor and gambling interests, and the Women's Christian Temperance Movement was also becoming powerful and there was a great deal of concern that if women were allowed the right to vote that the liquor and gambling industries, which advertised liberally in the San Francisco Chronicle, would be shut down. It was many years after that before women in California got the right to vote.

There are a couple of other things that have shaped who I am in approaching this task and I wanted to talk briefly about both of them. One of them, is having had the good fortune of attending law school at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville, Virginia, which was founded by Thomas Jefferson, as he said, as an old man in his dotage, because he believed that democracy would not survive if the people were not educated. And it was the first free public university opened to all. That began the process that now we have taken and advanced far beyond what Jefferson had ever envisioned in our University of California system. A system that we have to be proud of and we have to fund better.

But being on Jefferson's campus, it's very hard to spend three years in Charlottesville, Virginia, without really having and internalizing a sense of what democracy means. And internalizing what the cost was in revolution. We were ruled by a monarchy. If you didn't like something that was happening, it was tough toenails; you had no ability to change any of it. The hallmark of the system that we have now is we do have the ability to call for change. We have the ability to act collectively, and we have the ability through our elections to change the direction that we are establishing for this county on a regular basis and we just did that in spades and the result was the election of Nancy Pelosi as the first woman Speaker of the United States Congress.

Thomas Jefferson once said, "Where the people fear their government there is tyranny, where the government fears the people there is liberty." Now I don't think he meant fear in the thundering and lightning coming down from the heaven's sense. I think what he meant is accountability. That the government should fear when it does something wrong, when actions are taken that are not in accordance with the wishes of the people; and much of what I will do is about restoring trust, faith and confidence in the decisions made by me and everyone in this agency. There will be an open process and as much transparency as much as we can possibly muster whether it be the smallest decision to the largest and all the way down to how voting machines and counting equipment operate. We are going to eliminate the use of private, invisible, proprietary software that no one can evaluate as a means of counting our votes.

In this country, we accept election results whether we win or lose, whether our side wins or loses, because we believe that the system is fair and we know that we will have an opportunity to press for change at the time of the next election. Transparency is the hallmark to create a fair system and to further the principles of democracy by assuring people that even if they lose they will have that opportunity to petition their government and to work for change in the next cycle. That is an issue that transcends partisanship. It is not post partisan; it transcends partisanship.

Now, transparency is really not a new theme for me; it is something that I had in mind in 1992, when I first took office and introduced a bill to put all of the workings of the Legislature online for anyone to see what was happening. And the really interesting thing is everything that we discussed then still applies now.

There were security concerns: who can get into the system and hack it? One of the senators said to me, "I've never voted for tax increase. What if somebody gets in and changes my vote so it looks like I voted for all of the tax increases?" There were privacy concerns: Would citizens be known? Who was looking at various things? There were control issues. I had members of the Legislature say, "How will I know what my constituents are concerned about if they don't have to call me to ask me what is happening with the bill?" Self-service was not really in the vocabulary at that point.

Then there was the idea that we would create a profit center for the Legislature by charging for this information. That sent me home to have nightmares of Thomas Jefferson hocking the Constitution on the home shopping channel. I decided at that point if we couldn't get that out of the bill in the Senate that we would just let the bill go for the year and start over again. Fortunately, we were able to convince the Chair of the Senate Rules Committee, I think it was David Roberti at that time, to take it out and the bill went into place and was signed by Governor Pete Wilson and created ripples around the world as other governments began to work to put their information online.

It was during the course of that bill that I developed an enduring friendship with my mentor, Senator John Vasconcellos, and also where I learned from Willie Brown one of the most important tenants that I learned in government which is "seek forgiveness not permission."

Well, we will continue that march towards transparency. We do not nurture liberty, encourage honesty, and build trust by restricting access to information. We build trust and confidence by opening up doors and inviting the people to participate in the decision making process because after all it is your government. That is the philosophy I embraced during my 14 years in the Legislature and is what continues to guide me here.

Now we all think of this agency as being about elections, but it's actually much broader than that. It is where campaign finance information is available. It is the first point of contact for many small businesses when they file their corporation or partnership papers. So, it is the first impression of what it is going to be like to be a California business and deal with the California bureaucracy. Our Archives is here, so we have the history of the state right here, very important to me. I can't wait to see what treasures are there. And until we have marriage equality, it is where the Domestic Partners Registry resides. So it is very important to many people, right now.

Many of those functions need to be updated and modernized and I have some ideas of things we ought to add as well. Of course, we will be working to rebuild people's faith in the integrity of the election system. And to do that I am going to draw on the experience

that I had, starting as a young child hanging out with my grandfather, Grandpa Bowen, who was a draftsman. Both of my grandfathers were draftsmen in a large machine tool company. He was the guy who had everybody's TV and radio when it broke apart on his workbench, testing it and putting it back together again. He had a metal lath in his basement, and I learned to operate the metal lath when I was about five years old. What I knew about it was it made really cool curly cues of metal. Wide, narrow; I have no idea why it was making those, but it was really great. The workbench and the idea of taking things apart and seeing how they work is an idea that has stayed with me and if you look at how I worked in the Legislature, it really is about taking things apart and then putting them back together or seeing if there's a better way.

Now I also have some examples of how not to do that. I do remember my clock radio disappearing into the basement. I think my brother and my dad were responsible for that. It never did come back upstairs. What had happened was that technology had changed in the interim, we have moved from vacuum tubes and crystals and transistors to circuit boards. It is much harder to track what is going on with a circuit board, what's not soldered where, what goes where, you can't see where the electrons flow. So it is a lot harder without a lot of specific equipment and tools to be able to repair things, to make them work.

And that is exactly the problem that we have with voting machines. You can't see what is going on in there. You don't know what is happening and therefore you have to rely on someone else. You have to be able to bring transparency into those systems and I am going to rely on everything that Earl Melville Bowen taught me as a young child at my very own pint size workbench. Where I'm sure I visibly did all kinds of interesting things, but I learned how to take things apart.

We are going to do that with our democracy too. We have 15 million registered voters in California but barely half of them were inspired enough to cast ballots in the November election. Strengthening our democracy means giving the 7 million people in this state who are registered, who are eligible to register, but haven't done so, a reason to register and then giving all 22 million of those potential voters a reason to vote and a ready opportunity to vote in every election that we hold.

That means going to high school and college campuses. It means working with the schools, with the Superintendent of Public Education, with the community colleges, and starting much earlier. Which is what we did with recycling and on environmental issues. We started much younger and we raised a generation of people who are now confronting the issues of global warming. We need to do that with voting and democracy or we will lose our democracy. We are on a downtrend in participation in voting with only the real bright spot being young people, under the age of 30, and we need to change that.

Thomas Jefferson and his contemporaries had to rock the boat in order to create a democracy that we've taken for granted, that we do take for granted. If you haven't been in this building before, please, stop in the courtyard and go out to Constitution Wall. There you will see above you (the words) Rights, Assemble, Petition, Privacy, Liberty,

Speech, Press, Redress, Conscience, Common Good and much more. They are the building blocks of our democracy. It is a democracy that is unmatched in the world.

This is a magnificent agency, it is one that is steeped in history, has a lengthy record of achievements and one that I am looking forward to building on. It means inspiring people to think creatively and differently by pursuing ideas that will rock the boat and to get people to say “Yes, that’s worth trying.” But that is the great thing about democracy, you experiment, you figure out what works, you take things apart, you put them back together in a better way and you move a country forward and you move the state forward. It’s really is an incredible system we’ve inherited, and every day I feel privileged to have been given the chance to impact the very bedrock notions of how it is that we choose our own future. We choose our own futures by voting and participating. And that is something to cherish.

I want to thank everyone who is here today and everyone who is watching on the Web. One of the things that I am devoted to is, being an early adopter, is looking at how we communicate and there are so many new ways. Nobody was doing instant messages, Skype didn’t exist. Ten years ago, we didn’t have Voice Over Internet Protocol. All of this is going to play a profound role in how our newer younger voters communicate and how they do their politics. So when we go out do to do outreach, and to figure out what to do with these younger voters, we are not going to go tell them what to do, we are going to listen to them and they are going to tell us what the future of democracy looks like.

We really are going to make this a government of the people, by the people, and for the people in every way. Everyone who wants to can play an important part in the future of this agency. Thank you so much. I pledge everyday to come in and work towards the best in all of us, to guide us, to realize the incredible dreams that our founding fathers had of self-governance and of being able to make our own decisions for ourselves, every day. Thank you.